

Week ending Nov. 2

I'm shocked. What's all this letter-writing in the British Army's time, when what you ought to be doing in that time is writing a novel? Though I can't deny that it's nice, getting such a long letter. It was well timed, too. That morning I was woken early because the man who is putting in central heating in Barbara's basement for Barbara's baby rang the wrong bell, so instead of a guilty rush and reading letters in the bas, I was able to go back to bed and idle through it deliciously. The heating man is sixteen years old and pure essence of spiv - I'm sure the radiators won't work. He talks the fruitiest adenoidal cockney imaginable, with no consonants, only sort of 'ng' noises. It took me quite a long time to translate 'I e ee-ig e-i-uh' into 'I'm the heating engineer'.

Oh dear, how nasty you are in relation to Edith. It's so horrid how you call her 'thing' and 'bitch' and 'ugly' all the time. I'm very glad you suffer these primeval pangs when she sleeps with other people - serves you bloody well right. There is, presumably, something in her which likes not being treated as a human being (however much she resents it on the surface), because when some curious vulgarity or cruelty comes out in one it's usually because the other person invites it - but still I suspect (this may be just solidarity with my sex) that she is nicer than you in this. As for your pangs, they are very ~~xxxix~~ primitive. Not even, at bottom, concerned with human relationships, I'm sure. You often see it happening with dogs, over food, and I'm sure apes display the same reaction even more clearly though I haven't had the change to observe them. If a dog is ill and has gone right off its food, and you are trying to tempt it to eat again, there is one almost infallible method: offer the rejected food to another animal or pretend to eat it yourself. Lichee used to react if you leant out of a window and called 'Cat!', instantly huffing up her fur and hurrying to the dish, and eating with much more wolfish movements than usual. It's a property-preserving instinct, rather than a sex one. I somehow don't think it's quite the same thing as 'falling-in-love-because-of-inaccessibility', though the two things get mixed up (I'm in a very scientific mood, reading Julian Huxley on evolution and even wishing I could understand physics. I find the thought that molecules obey the same laws throughout all matter, from pebbles to brain cells, much more exciting than any philosophical speculation).

Christmas (or Xmas, as we say, rather than Cmax!): oh, my dear, couldn't it be managed? It would be marvellous. It's a midweek Xmas this year, not attached to a weekend, so I could go home for the w.e. instead of for the Xmas, or vice versa, which ever fitted best. I would love it if you came. Christmas in London is very odd. Year after year after year, whatever else I failed my family in, I always went home for Christmas, and I used to imagine that London became gay and wonderful, lovely parties etc, all being missed by me. Then last year, for the first time, I announced 'This Christmas I will spend in London'. And it turned out that every single person I know was going away! Barry, by tradition, goes up to his wife's family in Hull, X was flying to Paris, Y to Rome, Z to Birmingham. So in the end, after giving a party with Barbara and the Vs just before the holiday, I climbed into that old train after all. Nan, who spends it in London because her mother comes to her instead of the other way round, says that it's the stillest, silentest day of the year - no busses run at all, everyone's indoors. All that happens is that on Christmas Eve a lot of people are being sick outside pubs because of drinking more than they are used to. (They start at Office Parties, if it's a weekday. You see the little secretaries and the respectable old book-keepers, flushed and teetering in the underground.) So it's quite possible that we couldn't make any great gaiety if you came (the Vs have even started talking, disloyally, of

taking off somewhere, though they may not). But surely someone would be about, given your friends as well as mine. And anyway, it would be better than any party to have you here.

You wouldn't mind a Campbell in the sitting room? Though of course Alison may go away. It might be pleasant if she didn't, because although I still don't know her, hardly ever seeing her, she is attractive & I wouldn't be surprised if she was rather 'yon'. She has a delicate, rather fastidious way with her, & an enchanting eye-lighting-up smile, and intelligence, I think.

Love, it would be very simple if you'd let me pay your fare. I'd give you a Xmas present, otherwise, and think of the bother of doing up a parcel & getting it to the post-office. Whereas if you came here it would be easy, and on top of that it would be a Xmas pres. for me!

No, you didn't ever tell me about Brenda saving your life. I'd like to hear that story.

The Herrich Düring whom I love is the main character in Arno Schmidt's faun book. He's fifty, a very respectable minor civil servant with a dreary wife & children, & inside he is an anarchist. What he thinks while he is saying "Yes, Herr sub-Prefect... no, Herr sub-Prefect..." is so satisfactorily outrageous that he is even a triumphant anarchist, & his gloating when the sub-Prefect or his wife or someone falls into one of his traps by responding to something exactly as he knew they would, making an exhibition of themselves for his private delight, is most sympathetic. There are lots of maddening things about the book - for one it's written in little flashes instead of as a continuous narrative, &

for another Düring's (Schmidt's) nature-romanticism is too "poetic" for my taste, & for another, there's too much word-juggling - but Düring's There: The man who knows, The man who sees through, The man who laughs, or who howls with rage, & who hollow on earth is going to dislodge from being a private person so that never never will he have any effect on ghastly events. Us, in fact - tho' v. much an individual.

I couldn't read Heart of the Matter either - couldn't even open it, tho' I bought it in Penguin. But nor could I read Gork - I just got bored, can't remember exactly why. Atuk I'll send you. Simple humour, I suppose, but it made me laugh a lot. The sort of Thing that doubles dear Mordecai up (not in book): man in hospital bed with broken leg, which has to be suspended from an arrangement of strings & pulleys, balanced by large round weight which hangs above man's head. In the middle of the night: Bouk. String has broken, weight falls & cracks man's skull. Mordecai laughs for a week (he's a very kind man, in action).

Ought to end this letter - it's getting too long. But I must tell you about Man Ray (you know who he was - is, I mean? He was one of the first Dadaists and Surrealists, used to exhibit things called Object to be Destroyed and so on - a teacup made of rabbit skin was one of them, and a metronome with a huge eye, and an iron with nails stuck in it, and a painting fifteen feet long of an enormous pair of red lips floating in the sky). Others come and go, Man Ray goes on, and recently wrote an autobiography which we've just published, and came over for an exhibition of his works to celebrate publication. He easily wins my first prize for toupet. He's in his seventies, small, spry, with a Beatles haircut and a pretty young wife. 'Well, you see,' he told me gravely, 'I reached a decision a long time ago. You mustn't think I never did the other - I did, when I was a young man I worked for a long time - oh, three or four years, I think, doing boring things. Then I said to myself this is silly, I am never again going to do anything that's a chore. I'm going to live for pleasure ~~for now~~ from now on. And I have.

And the strange thing is that as soon as you start doing that, they begin to buy the things you make.' And with my own eyes I saw a woman pay ~~5500~~ 650 guineas for a painting which he made like this: 'I squeezed paint on a board, and then I put it face down on the canvas and put a plank on it, and then I sit on it - but only for a second. And then I pull the first board off the second board and there it is.' I love him, because he does this sort of thing in a very special way. You would think that it could only be done by either a fool taking himself seriously, or a crook taking other people in. Man Ray just potters about doing silly things because he enjoys it; I don't think he cares at all if someone says 'this isn't art' etc - he would say 'It's not meant to be anything but just something I've done.' And if people are prepared to pay him all those guineas for it - 'Isn't that nice!' he thinks.

He and his wife are staying in the flat of a man called Penrose - very rich, and an art collector who has written books on Picasso etc. It's a fabulous flat. It's shabby and messy but comfortable - well heated, but no attention paid to the decor. But on every inch of the walls and on every shelf and mantelpiece there are things which make ones eyes bug out. Lots of Picassos, Chagalls, Chiricos etc etc - not very well framed or lit, hanging crooked sometimes. And a little Egyptian sculpture here, an Aztec mask there, and a piece of roman glass here, and a black human face there from the Hebrides (the man's skin, mounted on straw - a death mask - very beautiful). Mrs Penrose used to be married to an Egyptian for years, but I didn't ask who. She was a famous photographer called Lee Miller - very beautiful once, I should think, in a racy fair way, with extraordinarily penetrating grey-blue eyes. She's still sexy and wild-looking, like a rather unreliable but stylish chestnut horse.

At another party there was Kathleen Nott who reviewed my book in the Observer, rather stupidly, I thought, so I didn't ~~particularly~~ particularly want to talk to her (rugged old square thing, like a girl-guide's leader, with lots of square teeth gnashing away between thin lips). But she came churning across the room like a tank, slapped me on the back and said: 'I reviewed your book very well ~~in the Observer~~ you'll be glad to meet me!' Oh why didn't I think of saying what John Gross said, afterwards, I should have said: 'You reviewed my book? Oh do tell me where?'

Beautiful days, we are having - everything round here is knee-deep in rustling golden leaves off the plane trees, and the sun shines, and there's a smell of bonfires, and I've just eaten a lovely soup of spinach, garlic, butter, sour cream and lemon juice which I must remember to make again.

I think I shall now start believing in your Christmas visit. It is only natural that you should come. Will Samir be here, or does he go home for the hols? If he's here he must be fitted in.

Fondest love,

